

NEWSLETTER *of* THE LEVANTINE FOUNDATION

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By way of introduction...

OUR AIMS AND OBJECTIVES - and a few words of thanks

by Elizabeth Sobczynski, Chief Executive of The Levantine Foundation



The 6th-century Deir al-Surian, Wadi al-Natrun, Egypt

This is the first issue of The Levantine Foundation Newsletter, and it is our intention that it should become a regular source of information for all our supporters and friends. As we go to press, I am delighted to be able to inform our readers that we now have royal patronage: HRH The Prince of Wales has kindly agreed to support us. I would like to take this opportunity to thank His Royal Highness for his endorsement and the great encouragement it brings.

As many of you will know, The Levantine Foundation is a charitable organisation, registered in the UK, whose aim is to record and preserve the textual cultural heritage of the Near East through expertise, education, and dissemination of knowledge. The Foundation's first project is the preservation of the collection of ancient Christian manuscripts from the al-Surian Monastery dating back to the sixth century.

It is nearly three years since I established the Foundation, and it has been an extraordinary experience to witness its development and expansion. Having started as a small independent conservation project in 1999, it has been wonderfully rewarding to see the Foundation grow and, latterly, gain international status and recognition. As I write, the Foundation is in the final stages of obtaining registration in Egypt, a requirement which will enable us to carry out our ambitious plans in areas of conservation and education. The registration will also place us firmly on the map of the Levant. I should like to thank Dr. Khalil Nougaim for undertaking the responsibility of being Executive Director of The Levantine Foundation in Egypt, as well as Hala Hashem of Zaki Hashem & Partners, Cairo for acting

on the Foundation's behalf on a pro bono basis.

The primary emphasis during the past three years has been to raise funds for the Deir al-Surian Library Project and to carry out conservation field campaigns, including training for the Egyptian professionals. Both these objectives have been achieved with the help of dedicated patrons, trustees, scholars and conservators who spent many weeks devoting their time to promoting and actively helping in the preservation of the collection. Two years ago, with the aim of providing access to manuscripts for scholars, students, researchers and monks alike, we embarked on the cataloguing of the oldest manuscripts, the Syriac collection. Two months ago, that cataloguing work was completed, and now, for the first time in the Library's history, a catalogue including digital images is to be published.

We have been particularly fortunate this year to have gained the support and patronage of Sir Derek Plumbly, the British Ambassador to Egypt, and Lady Plumbly. Their interest in the aims of the Foundation has been invaluable, and it was thanks to their generosity, initiative and encouragement that in May this year we were able to launch an appeal at the British Embassy in Cairo to raise international awareness of Deir al-Surian's heritage and to raise funds that will ensure the viability of our activities for the next five years. I am happy to report that to date we have received cheques and pledges amounting to a total of £300,000 sterling.

While our original patrons maintained their support, the past year has not been without loss: Fergus Crawford Munro, who has been Honorary Treasurer of the Foundation since 2002, retired in June. Fergus's contribution to the running of the Foundation has been considerable and I shall miss

his advice and support very much.

I should like to acknowledge our eternal gratitude to His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, His Grace Bishop Mattaios Abbot of the Surian Monastery, and Fr Bigoul el Souriany, the Curator of the Deir al-Surian library, without whose help we would not be able to preserve the collection, and to His Eminence Archbishop Gregorios of Thyateira and Great Britain for endorsing our work in Egypt.

The scope of the knowledge required for a collaborative venture of this kind is wide-ranging and brings together a number of experts and scholars. I am particularly grateful to paper and book conservators who give their expertise and time in preserving the collection: Alan Buchanan; Irene Campden; Jaqueline Coppen; Louise Drover; David Jacobs; Erica Kotze; Roderick Lane; Suzanne Press; Lara Speronni and Michael Wheeler.

We owe special thanks to Dr Sebastian Brock and Professor Lucas van Rompay for cataloguing of the Syriac collection.

We are grateful to Professor B Ford and Werner Gaier for investigating a strategy for the library improvements using Passive Cooling System, and to Malcolm Wood for planning re-arrangement and refurbishment of the current library building.

I would like to thank Charity and Jon Fox for designing the Foundation's website, thus helping to spread news about our work.

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by many individuals, trusts and companies in Egypt and Great Britain.

Finally, I should like to reiterate how grateful I am to all those who support us, and particularly those who have made these last three years so fruitful. I treasure their advice and dedication to the project and look forward to our future collaboration.

A Precious Inheritance

By Fr Bigoul, Curator of Deir al-Surian Library

The monastery at Al-Surian possesses a polyglot library of inimitable treasures in the form of several hundred manuscripts that constitute one of the largest collections in the entire Coptic Orthodox Church. There are four different sub-collections that divide linguistically into: 1. The Syriac Collection, 2. The Coptic Boharic collection, 3. The Christian Arabic Collection and 4. The Ethiopic Collection. This Library is considered to be one of the key bridges for communication in the Christian world and an invaluable source for studying the media of writing and the types of illumination used at various times. It also provides evidence of the methods and styles of restoration and preservation used at different periods over the centuries. Apart from the importance of the texts, the study of the bindings of these manuscripts is of great value to scholars working in the fields of bookbinding and conservation. The majority of the collection is, however, in very poor condition and desperately needs further conservation.

I will not mention the Syriac Collection at this written juncture, since it forms part of Sebastian Brock's and Lucas van Rompay's article in this issue of the Newsletter, nor will I touch on the Ethiopic Collection, since it will be the subject of another article in a future issue.

Among the 150 volumes (and a considerable number of valuable fragments) on a variety of subjects that make up the Library's Coptic Collection, there are three that deserve special mention. The first of these is a unique New Testament on parchment, which can be dated to the late 11th century. It contains the entire text of St. John's Gospel and it is the earliest complete example that exists in any Coptic Orthodox library, and the second earliest in existence anywhere after the 'Curzon Cateneia' in Perham library, which dates from AD889 and was originally removed from Al-Surian. Secondly, there is an important, though incomplete, volume on parchment, dating from AD1181, which contains the liturgy of the (inauguration) of new churches. It is the earliest known volume on this subject in the entire Coptic



The Four Gospels, Ms. Deir al- Surian, Coptic Boharic, AD 1220

Church. Missing texts were completed on paper in the course of the 20th century. Unfortunately, both of these volumes were restored and rebound in modern style in the course of the 12th century. Finally, there is an illuminated and ornamentally decorated New Testament, on Arabic paper and dated to AD1220, which is important because it has not been restored. It is considered to be one of the best examples for studying illumination in Coptic



Fr. Bigoul

manuscripts.

The Christian Arabic collection is of particular significance in the scholastic work of monastic spirituality, since the whole of the medieval scribing work was written in Arabic. It is the largest collection in the Library, and although it constitutes a mere drop in the ocean of Christian Arabic manuscripts, it is one that helps maintain the historiography and theological development of early monasticism. One particular volume, dating from the 13th century, contains the sayings of St Simon the Stylite; another, dating from AD1253, has the sayings of St Isaac, the 6th-century Bishop of Nineveh. One of the two New Testament volumes, written on paper and dating from AD1200, is devoted to the Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles; the other is an interpretation of the four Gospels, and together they rank among the best examples of writings from the beginning of this period. The whole collection consists of over one thousand manuscripts, dating from the 13th to the 20th centuries. Many of the illuminated manuscripts provide evidence of collaboration between Syrian and Coptic monks, and marginal annotations are valuable to those studying the theology and history of the Coptic Church, Egypt and monasticism itself.

In addition to these collections, and to the Syriac and Ethiopic collections, there is a bilingual collection of dual Coptic/Arabic written on the same page in two columns. A volume dating from AD1255, on paper, contains the Psalter and the Prophet's prayers. Other notable volumes are a Book of Hours, also dating from AD1255, a New Testament, dating from AD1281, and a guide to the prayers to be used during Holy Week, from AD1237. The decorations are sometimes in Syriac or Ethiopic style, with their traditional monograms. Many of the manuscripts are richly illuminated.

We are very conscious of how important the manuscripts we possess at Deir al-Surian are for present and future generations, and we are fully aware of how essential it is to catalogue these treasures and to preserve them in the best possible conditions. This is why we are so grateful for the conservation work presently being undertaken by the Levantine Foundation.



from left Fr. Bigoul, Fr. Georgius, HG Bishop Mattaia, Fr. Azer



Dr. Sebastian Brock and Professor Lucas van Rompay,
Deir al-Surian, May 2006

The Syriac manuscripts of Deir al-Surian: some first impressions

Sebastian Brock and Lucas van Rompay

Deir al-Surian, the Coptic Orthodox monastery in the Wadi Natrun half way between Cairo and Alexandria, deserves to be in the Guinness Book of Records for the number of 'firsts' it can claim: over the centuries it has preserved the largest collection of Syriac manuscripts in the world; among these is the oldest dated Christian literary manuscript in any language (AD 411), the oldest dated biblical manuscript in any language (Isaiah, AD 459/60), and the oldest dated Gospel manuscript in any language (AD 510). Of these three manuscripts the first and the third were written in Edessa (modern Sanliurfa in SE Turkey), the original home of the Aramaic dialect known today as Syriac.

Although a large number of the monastery's original collection of Syriac manuscripts are today in Rome and London, having been acquired by the Vatican Library in the 18th century, and by British Museum in the 19th, a respectable quantity still remains there, and these include a number of works of great importance. Although a summary catalogue was made of these some half century ago by Murad Kamil, a noted Egyptian scholar of Semitic languages, it is only in recent years that work has been commenced on a much more detailed catalogue of the Syriac manuscripts that are still in the monastery's library. This is being done in conjunction with the programme of conservation of the monastery's manuscripts undertaken by the Levantine Foundation under the direction of Elizabeth Sobczynski.

Although there are only forty manuscripts, since many of these consist of several completely different manuscripts which have been bound up together, the number is in reality considerably higher. Furthermore, there are over 150 fragments, ranging in size from diminutive scraps to a few reasonably complete folios. As part of the process of compiling the catalogue, our second visit together took place over a fortnight in May of 2005, and it is on some of the most interesting of our discoveries that we report on here.

Highlights from the Syriac collection

These forty manuscripts do in fact present a very special challenge to the Syriac student. Only half of

them survived as independent manuscripts. Some of these are incomplete; others have lost their cover as well as the initial and final folios. Apart from these losses and some additional damage at the beginning and end, however, the parchment (the material used for most pre-10th-century manuscripts) is often in good condition. It is still remarkably strong, even though some basic consolidation work is urgently required. The other half of the manuscripts went through medieval restoration processes, during which parts of various manuscripts were bound together. In some cases the medieval restorers were careful enough to bind together texts of similar content (such as biblical texts or ascetical texts); in other cases the combination was made less consciously and parts of manuscripts were put together only because their size was much the same.

These composite manuscripts, therefore, are full of surprises, as the content and time of composition of the texts may radically change from one section to the other. An additional feature of medieval restoration practices is that pieces of waste-parchment (stemming from dismantled manuscripts) was used for repair work, to strengthen the cover, or to separate the different quires of the new manuscript. Such pieces, although diminutive, are of interest in their own right: they should be treated as fragments. They are detached from their original context, sometimes trimmed to fit the new manuscript, partly erased, occasionally glued together, and often tantalisingly difficult to read. But each of them has its own story to tell and may give us insight in to the intellectual life in the library and the monastery as well as the work carried out in the restoration workshop.

In the relatively modest collection of forty manuscripts, the number of (portions of) manuscripts dated or datable to the 6th and 7th centuries is remarkably high. At least eighteen pieces may safely be attributed to this early period (one manuscript, no. 9, which has the four Gospels, may be attributed to the 5th century!). In the 6th and 7th centuries Syriac Christian culture was still in its heyday and every new piece of evidence is an extremely precious addition to our limited corpus of data. Even if many of the texts are known from elsewhere, the new Deir al-Surian manuscripts are often older than the other available evidence. They

will, therefore, be of prime importance in the future study of a number of early Syriac texts. It goes without saying that these early manuscripts were all written in Syria or Mesopotamia, as Syriac manuscripts only started being brought to Deir al-Surian in the ninth century. From the 9th century onwards, Deir al-Surian had its own scriptorium in which Syriac manuscripts were produced.

Ms. 16 is one of the manuscripts which we were able to study in some detail during our recent May campaign. It is a composite manuscript. Folios 1 to 75 stem from two different 6th- or 7th-century manuscripts containing homilies by John Chrysostom, an author who was very popular, not only in the Greek world, but also in the Syriac churches. Most of these homilies are known in Greek as well as in a number of Syriac manuscripts, but our manuscript is important due to its early date (one folio is missing at the beginning, but this happens to survive in the British Library as ms. Add. 14,670, f. 1). This would surely be enough for a Syriac scholar to get excited about. But the real surprise comes with the third section of this manuscript, comprising folios 76 to 194. This was originally an independent manuscript of the 7th century which, according to a note on f. 76r, was brought from Baghdad to Deir al-Surian in 932 AD, by Moses of Nisibis, one of the most famous abbots of the monastery. The title is given as "Treatise on faith". Three marginal notes, however, identify the work as "Book of the mind", written by Mar Aba, the disciple of Ephrem (d. 373). We are dealing, in fact, with a systematic work of spiritual and ascetical content which to our knowledge does not exist anywhere else in Syriac manuscripts. In a carefully written language which has distinct literary qualities and uses quite a sophisticated terminology, the author gives spiritual advice which focuses on faith as the unifying factor in man's life – counterbalancing the composite nature of his body – and on man's proper relationship to his Creator. Some of the imagery reminds one of Ephrem's works, and there can be little doubt that the work was originally written in Syriac and was not translated from Greek. Although our reading of the work was rather hasty, we thought that a date around the year 400 would be most likely.

continued...



"Stupid Abraham" is how the artist of this ornamental cross identified himself. He worked in AD 873. This loose folio is bound together with parts from four other manuscripts.

If these first impressions prove to have some foundation, we would be dealing with a very important addition to the modest corpus of Syriac literature of the 4th and early 5th century. With its 118 folios, or nearly 7000 lines of Syriac text, this really would be a major new document, the publication, translation, and study of which would be a fascinating task for more than one Syriac scholar.

Confronted with such a discovery, it is difficult not to focus on just this one text and to forget about all the other manuscripts. But in fact most of the other manuscripts, in particular the earlier ones, have their own surprises in store. Ms. 22 is another manuscript which received some attention in our May campaign. Again, this is a composite manuscript. Its first part (folios 1 to 94) contains writings by Ephrem, Isaac of Antioch, and Jacob of Serug, and it easily ranks among the very earliest witnesses for each of these authors. Around thirty folios are missing from the beginning of this manuscript, but with the exception of two or three folios, they all can be found in the British Library as ms. Add. 14,573. Now, these ninety-four folios (distributed over 10 quires) at an unknown point in time were bound together with a most remarkable collection of thirty-two folios, taken from five different manuscripts, mostly of the 9th and 10th centuries. The content of these folios is Greek philosophy, a field in which Syriac Christians were very much interested. While some of these texts are known from other Syriac manuscripts and have been the subject of recent scholarship, others seem to be unique. They refer to various Greek philosophers and commentators of Plato and Aristotle, and deal with such topics as the origin of matter and the nature of the human soul. Interestingly, one of the philosophical texts has a marginal note saying that the manuscript in question

(which of course we are unable to reconstruct in its full form) was given as a present to Deir al-Surian by patriarch Abraham, who headed the Coptic Church from 977 to 981 and happened to be of Syrian origin.

It is hardly possible to overestimate the importance of the Syriac manuscripts of Deir al-Surian. They are our main sources for the study of early Syriac literature and culture and at the same time they give us insight into the very special relations that existed between Egyptian and Syriac Christianity. Before anything else, however, the manuscripts which presently are in the Monastery should be preserved in the best possible conditions and, where necessary, should be conserved and consolidated.

An exciting discovery among the fragments

Although the fragments might at first sight look totally unprepossessing and unpromising, this has proved definitely not to be the case. In the first place, quite a large proportion of the fragments - tantalisingly usually the smallest! - are written in hands which can be securely dated to about the 6th century. Since the number of surviving Syriac manuscripts of this date is not large, even the smallest fragment of this date can turn out to be of interest, above all if the text it contains can be identified, for then it allows one to build up a picture of what sort of texts made up the contents of the library in its original form. On the basis of the notes taken during our previous visit together, in December 2004, it proved possible to make a number of 'joins' between fragments still in the monastery and manuscripts in the British Library which were purchased from the monastery in the 19th century. In the course of our May visit another very exciting join was identified. The manuscript dated AD 411, mentioned above, is today in the British Library, and it contains a number of texts translated from Greek, the majority of which do not survive in their Greek original and are only known from this single manuscript. Right at the end of this manuscript is a list of people who suffered martyrdom in the Persian Empire in the mid-4th century during a savage persecution in the reign of the Shah Shapur II; the folio with the end of this list, however, is badly torn, and only a small proportion is preserved.

It was thus a moment of great excitement when we realised that among the fragments were three small strips of parchment which came from this damaged folio. It was possible to be sure of this identification at once for two reasons: firstly because of the content, with parts of columns containing lists of names, and secondly, because of the very beautiful



The manuscript contains the "Book of the Holy Hierotheos". The author is depicted here (right), standing next to patriarch Cyriacus (793-817). The two figures in the upper part are identified as Zakkay (right) and Mattay (left), but are otherwise unknown.

and distinctive calligraphic hand in which this manuscript is written (it even served as a model for one of the Cambridge University Press's Syriac type faces!). Shortly after returning to England it was possible to visit the British Library and compare a transcript of the fragments with the damaged folio at the end of the manuscript in the British Library: two of them fitted nicely into what was left on the damaged folio, while the third, though definitely belonging to the same folio, evidently comes from a part of the original folio which does not otherwise survive (now that we have been through all the fragments, there does not seem to be any hope that more fragments from the same folio might turn up in the monastery). But thanks to these new fragments we now have the names of a number of new martyrs, both men and women; in a few cases a detailed account of their martyrdom is preserved elsewhere. It so happens that we can be fairly sure of the circumstances in which the names of these Persian martyrs reached Edessa: in 410 Marutha, the bishop of Maifarqat (today in E. Turkey) was sent by the Roman emperor as ambassador to the Persian Shah. During the course of his visit he took the opportunity of getting a synod of the Persian bishops to accept officially the Council of Nicaea (of 325): since this was a council convened by the Roman Emperor, the Church in the Persian Empire had not been involved at the time. In the course of this synod Marutha learnt of these martyrs and in

fact took back with him some of their bones as relics (as a result of which Maifarqat was given the new name of Martyropolis, 'city of martyrs'). It would have been on his return home, by way of Edessa, that Marutha provided the list of these martyrs, hitherto unknown in the Roman Empire, and this will then have been copied down, in November 411, at the end of our manuscript as important hot news.



Professor Lucas van Rompay with the AD 411 Syriac fragments.

The Levantine Foundation Activity Report

from January 2003 – May 2006



Introducing the first activity report in May 2006, Elizabeth Sobczynski, the Chief Executive of the Levantine Foundation reported that much had happened and had been achieved during these three years, 2003-2006, the most significant achievement being the registration and establishment in 2002 of the Levantine Foundation as a registered charity, and the commitment of the Foundation to raise funds in support of the Deir

al-Surian Library Project.

During this period, new programme priorities were formulated and undertaken, some have been already completed, some are in progress, while new activities are being planned. "It is especially worth mentioning the greatly emphasised effort in the area of preservation of the collection and facilitating the educational activities", she said. Another area in which great progress had been made concerned the architectural survey of the library building and a design of "Passive Cooling" strategy aimed at

improving the existing environment.

"In education, we have put emphases on training and sharing of information with the monastic community and local specialists in book conservation. I believe that by doing so we have begun laying long-term foundations for the proper maintenance and care of libraries in the neighbouring monasteries. The interest that these activities received indicate that there is a great need for this kind of action"

In closing she thanked all patrons and trustees of the Foundation, and in particular His Holiness Pope Shenouda III, and His Grace Bishop Mattaas, for their continuous support and patronage. She also acknowledged Father Bigoul's constant efforts as

The Deir al-Surian Library Conservation Project

Project Goal and Objectives

The primary goal of the project is to preserve the collection of manuscripts housed in the al-Surian Library, to provide conservation training and to disseminate the information.

Objectives include:

1. preservation of the collection
2. surveying and assessing the condition of the collection
3. cataloguing of the collection
4. providing documentation of manuscripts
5. providing training and scholarship, including guidance in the care of the collection
6. improving the library's environmental conditions
7. digitizing of selected manuscripts

Planning

The initial project was planned for five years and will consist of an estimated ten conservation campaigns in the field. A team of paper conservators, bookbinders, relevant scholars and other specialists chosen by the Foundation participate in each campaign duration of which is on average three weeks.

Activity Report 2003- 2006

The main focus during the period from January 2003 to May 2006 was to provide training for monks and Egyptian professionals in conservation methods and techniques, to survey and assess the condition of the collection, to prioritise manuscripts for conservation and establish a work pattern during the conservation field campaigns.

The specific activities included:

Survey of the collection

The aim of the conservation survey was to gain an overview of the physical condition of the collection with the objective of planning future conservation work and determining funding required to fulfil these objectives.

To date, the Coptic, Syriac and Ethiopic collection has been assessed and prioritised for conservation work.

A total of 210 bound manuscripts and fragments have been examined, and conservation records, which include description of physical condition, and treatment recommendation, have been generated. In addition a digital record has been made to provide a base-line from which to prioritise manuscripts for conservation treatment.

The examination and assessment of the Coptic-Arabic and Arabic collection, which forms the largest part of the collection, began - last year. It is estimated that the survey will be completed in approximately two years time.

Re-housing of the most vulnerable manuscripts

An estimated sixty of the most damaged and fragile bound manuscripts have been placed individually in acid-free protective enclosures to prevent further physical damage. In addition, approximately two hundred fragmentary manuscripts have been put in polyester sleeves and placed in archival compilation boxes to protect them from light and dust.

Cataloguing of the collection

The cataloguing of the Syriac bound manuscripts was initially started by Professor Lucas van Rompay of Duke University in North Carolina, USA in 2000. The results of this work were presented to Bishop Mattaas in February 2002 in the form of a draft catalogue.

In December 2004, Professor van Rompay returned to the Monastery with Dr Sebastian Brock of the University of Oxford to continue the cataloguing, which also included fragmentary manuscripts.

This work was completed in May 2006. Catalogues, which will include digital images will be published both in English and Arabic within the next two years.

Library Improvements

The control of temperature and relative humidity is a vital factor in the preservation of the collection. Inappropriate or fluctuating environmental conditions can cause irreparable damage to books and manuscripts.

The monastery's library is currently located on the top floor of a 1960s building. This building also houses the modern library, a conservation studio adjacent to the manuscript library, guest rooms, reception and a kitchen.

The library conditions were assessed in January 2003, and it was decided that it should be monitored in order to establish which areas are most in need of improvement.

Data-loggers were installed over a period of six months to monitor both the internal and the exterior climate conditions. The recorded measurements showed how inadequate, especially during the extreme months, were the conditions under which the collection is currently stored.

An environmental MA project was set up in collaboration with the Architectural Association and the Graduate School of Architecture in London to survey the Library building and to investigate the possibilities of controlling the environment using a low energy technique, called Passive Cooling System, which relies on natural ventilation and rejection of the auxiliary energy to condition the climate inside the building.

This strategy is currently under review together with an alternative proposal which would include re-arrangement, refurbishment and extension of the



Elizabeth Sobczynski and Fr. Bigoul, Deir al-Surian Library, May 2006

continued...

existing facility in order to provide controlled storage conditions, study centre and a conservation workshop area.

Preservation of the collection

Over the past two years the Levantine Foundation has supplied a large amount of conservation material and protective enclosures as well as archival boxes and polyester pockets for re-housing and protection of fragile manuscripts. In addition, the Foundation supplied vital conservation equipment including a very high-quality digital camera to enable digital recording and documentation of the collection.

Training and Education

There are two areas in which the Foundation has been providing training and assistance to the monastic and local community. Training in conservation and cataloguing of manuscripts was made available to the curator of the Deir al-Surian Library in 2002, when he attended work placements at the Windsor Castle Library, the Wellcome Institute and the British Library. Two work placements were offered in 2004 to British conservators as part of a cultural exchange programme which we are planning to expand in the future.

Training in preventative conservation theory and practice has been provided to the monks as well as the Egyptian professionals with the focus on preservation, conservation ethics and methods, archival storage and care of manuscript collections.

The aim is to develop a high level of manual skills, together with sensitivity to and understanding of the techniques being used, and respect for the disciplines they require.

Advice on maintenance and library care has been made available to monks from other monasteries in the form of conservation meetings and visits to the



HG Bishop Mattaia (seated), from left: Michael Joseph Attea, Elizabeth Sobczynski, Monty Atef Kamel and Fr. Bigoul

Surian conservation workshop during which they are encouraged to observe the most up-to-date conservation methods and techniques. The best attended meeting took place in November 2003 and included twenty-two monks.

The future

In the coming years, much attention and financial commitment will continue to be focused on the Surian Library and its collection. A great deal is being invested to make substantial improvements to the existing library environment, to publish the catalogues of the collection in English and Arabic and to provide training and assistance ensuring proper continuing care of the collection. This will

not only contribute to the local economy but represent a lasting resource for conservation activities in Egypt beyond the Monastery.

"Despite a great deal that has been achieved to dated an enormous task still lies ahead of the project," said Ms Sobczynski. The preservation and conservation is an ongoing activity requiring great financial and human resources as well as knowledge and expertise.

The major task of preserving and re-housing of the library is well underway but a big challenge is still to be realized before we are confident that the collection will be preserved for centuries to come as a priceless historical artefact.

The Seven Monks of Egypt

"What were the links between Egypt and Britain in the 7thC?"

"Was St. Cuthbert of Lindisfarne embalmed in AD687 using Egyptian techniques?"

"How did Bede obtain a pilgrim's guide to the city of Jerusalem?"

These questions, among many others, were the subject of a fascinating and moving talk given by Dr Michelle Brown, former Curator of Western Manuscripts at the British Library, at the Oriental Club, in London, in March 2004.

Kindly sponsored by Nigel Pilkington, a patron, and John Osborn, a member of the Club, the occasion was an opportunity for the trustees and patrons of the recently formed Levantine Foundation to introduce their project to an ever widening

audience of interested people as part of their fund-raising strategy.

The Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, one of the patrons, hosted the event and spoke about the work being carried out by Elizabeth Sobczynski and her team to conserve, catalogue and digitise the surviving books, manuscripts and fragments library of Deir-al-Surian in Wadi Natrun in the Egyptian western desert and to welcome Dr Brown.

Dr Brown gave a most eloquent talk, placing the library in its historic context – the monastery is one of the

world's oldest, originating in the sixth century – and explaining exactly why its conservation and study was so vital to the civilised world, it being the treasury of a shared heritage encompassing both western and near-eastern traditions. The trustees welcomed her strong call for financial support!

In the second part of her talk, Dr Brown made a lucid and strong argument to demonstrate the early links between the 7th century Celtic church in Britain and monks and pilgrims from the near East. Quoting evidence of shared techniques, embalming and book binding, as well as artistic symbols, icons and textiles, she showed that there is a clear continuity from early Egypt to Britain. "The legacy of the aftermath of the Graeco-Roman world is with us still!", she said, and she ended her talk with the following words, which lie at the very heart of The Levantine Foundation's mission:

"Next time I visit the simple, moving 7th century grave of the 'Seven Monks of Egypt' in the isles of Aran (Ireland),.... I shall think of the Wadi Natrun and the enquiring spirit which led people...from both areas to travel across the world in order to better understand one another in this traumatic, tumultuous but optimistic period of transition in the world order, and pray that we can continue to learn from them today".



Dr. Michael Georgy, Dr. Michelle Brown and Fr. Bigoul, London, June 2003

An Evening in Cairo

An important turning point in the fortunes of the Levantine Foundation was reached on the evening of May 16 when some 180 guests of Sir Derek Plumbly, the British Ambassador to Egypt, and Lady Plumbly attended a lecture given by Dr Sebastian Brock of the University of Oxford, followed by a reception, in the sumptuous surroundings of the ballroom of the ambassadorial Residence in Cairo.

Sir Derek and his wife have taken a strong interest in the aims and objectives of the Foundation and their enthusiasm and hospitality have made it possible to launch the charity's first appeal for funds in Egypt, where it is now in the process of being registered, and to draw the Egyptian public's attention to the vital need for conserving the unique treasury of sacred manuscripts that are kept in the library of the Coptic monastery of Deir al-Surian, and for cataloguing an important part of Egypt's early Christian heritage for the sake of future generations.

The occasion was chaired by Sir Derek, who introduced in turn Bishop Mattaos, the Abbot of Deir al-Surian, Dr Zahi Hawass, Secretary-General of Egypt's Supreme Council for Antiquities, and finally, Dr Sebastian Brock, who had flown in from Aleppo earlier that day. Dr Brock's lecture was entitled 'From Damascus to Baghdad to Wadi el-Natrun: the importance of the Syriac manuscripts of Deir al-Surian', and his principal purpose was to draw attention to the monastery's 'uniquely fine' Syriac and Coptic and Christian Arabic collections, and to highlight the urgent need for their conservation. Only two monasteries in Egypt, he told us, have preserved their ancient texts from the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries, St Catherine's in Sinai, and Deir al-Surian itself. The Syriac language, he explained for the benefit of the less scholarly among us, was a dialect of Aramaic, the lingua franca of the Middle East at the time of Jesus Christ. Indeed, it was a language with which Christ himself would have been familiar, said Dr Brock, and he recounted the legend of the King of Edessa who had written to Jesus inviting him to visit him. 'I have a nice little city,' he confided, 'and there is room for both of us.' Without the input of the Syriac influence in the translation movement under the Abbasid Caliphs in the 9th century, Dr Brock said, subsequent developments in Arab and, later, Western European philosophy would have looked very different.

Giving examples of the Syriac treasures at Deir al-Surian, Dr Brock told us that in addition to the incomparably precious 5th and 6th century gospel manuscripts, the monastery library had preserved the only complete manuscripts of the poems of St Ephrem, the 4th-century ascetic. These manuscripts were of immense importance not just for biblical scholars of early Christianity, but also for the knowledge they impart of the lives of the early saints, of Egyptian monastic spirituality and of the social history of the period. Two liturgical traditions, Syriac and Greek, were preserved at the library of Deir al-Surian, and even the notes left by contemporary readers on the margins of some of the volumes housed there threw light on historical details we might not otherwise have discovered.

Syriac monks had originally been attracted to the monastery in the Wadi el Natrun by the prestige and the traditions of the desert fathers, but also by the links with the prolific St Ephrem, who was



Sir Derek Plumbly addressing guests at the British Ambassador's Residence in Cairo

clearly one of the literary heroes of his day, and the mixed community of Coptic and Syrian monks soon grew and prospered.

Another hero figure to emerge from Dr Brock's talk was Moses of Nisibis, the 10th-century Abbot of al-Surian, who as well as beautifying the church and the monastic buildings was responsible for accumulating the riches of the library. In AD927 Abbot Moses led a delegation of desert monks to Baghdad to protest against a poll tax that had been levied against them. Wherever he went on his travels, Moses indulged his passion for acquiring manuscripts, and by the time he returned home in AD932, after a successful fiscal outcome, he had assembled a collection of some 250 manuscripts to take back to Deir al-Surian.

Moses was justly proud of the library he had created and he was fiercely protective of his collection. He had a useful tip, too, for modern librarians: inserted in one volume, Dr Brock

revealed, was an imprecation inveighing anathema upon any monk who borrowed, let alone stole, any of his books, but promising mercy to those who returned them.

From Moses of Nisibis' time to our own, Dr Brock said in conclusion, through all the vicissitudes of religious history, it was thanks to successive generations of Coptic Orthodox monks that the inspiring and priceless manuscripts of Deir al-Surian still exist today.

The meeting closed with an appeal made by John Beale on behalf of the Trustees of the Levantine Foundation for urgently needed donations to help fund the conservation and training programme initiated by Elizabeth Sobczynski at the monastery and to ensure the collections' survival for future generations.

William Dalrymple Lecture in aid of the Levantine Foundation

Christianity in the Eastern Mediterranean was the theme when writer and broadcaster William Dalrymple gave a talk to 170 people on 12 November 2004 at Bonhams Auctioneers in New Bond Street, London. The lecture was based on Dalrymple's book *From the Holy Mountain:*

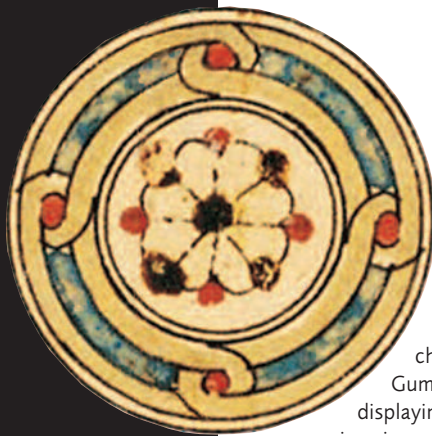


Elizabeth Sobczynski and William Dalrymple

Travels in the Shadows of Byzantium, and it was introduced by Dr Michelle Brown of the British Library who emphasised the importance of the work carried out by the Levantine Foundation in preserving and conserving a vital part of the early Christian heritage. Among the distinguished guests was the curator of the al-Surian monastic library Father Bigoul el Souriany who came to represent the Coptic Monastic Community who have been custodians of the collection for almost two millennia.



Church of the Holy Virgin, 7th century, adjacent to the tower containing the Deir al-Surian library



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Ugad hena shee tahat

My trip to Egypt started with the drive through Cairo from the airport through the hot Egyptian night, down the three-lane motorway lined with relentless billboards where drivers show off informal lane-changing skills worthy of the Gumball Rally. The tower blocks displaying their satellite dishes of varying sizes were barely visible in the dark as we travelled west towards Wadi al-Natrun where Deir al-Bishoi and Deir al-Surian are located – the two Coptic monasteries which would be home and work for the next two weeks. I was later to learn, while surfing the net, that Wadi al-Natroun derives its name from 'natron', the word for the sodium carbonate used in ancient times for mummification.

Apart from the late start the next day, our daily routine was much the same during the fourteen-day conservation campaign. A sandy and sunny fifteen minute walk from the Pope's compound in al-Bishoi took us past cultivated orchards and fields, palms trees, the occasional flowering jacaranda and the monks' cells, ending at Deir al-Surian – a 40-foot-high mud brick walled complex in the shape of Noah's Ark, with the 7th-century Church of the Holy Virgin at its centre. There is a definite feeling of being somewhere special on approaching the monastery, and knowing that the Holy Family are said to have spent time in Wadi al-Natroun during their flight into Egypt adds to this feeling.

In October 2005, additional space had been devoted to the library and bindery for the ongoing preservation and training programme. The new rooms include a conservation studio, a separate area for wet treatments and pressing, a kitchen and dining area and of course a 'comfort station'. For this trip, the conservation team comprised four conservators – Suzanne Press and myself from the UK, and Monty Atef Kamel and Michael Joseph Attea from Egypt – led by Elizabeth Sobczynski, Chief Executive of the Levantine Foundation. We were joined by Albert Alfy Edward, a conservator from Cairo, who visited the project for one-to-one training with Elizabeth. Being self contained within the library meant that we could manage our time well and focus on the important task at hand, and living and working with Egyptian conservators presented ample opportunities to learn some Arabic and exchange stories, information about our respective countries and conservation ideas.

In the studio we split into teams of two – each concentrating on a manuscript which had been

selected during the previous campaign. For Monty and I, the focus of the intensive thirteen-day training period was to carry out paper repairs to a 17th-century manuscript which had been disbound in preparation for the repair work. The broad, Coptic script was executed in rich matt black carbon and iron gall ink onto European handmade laid paper which had been heavily burnished in preparation for writing. Years of handling had caused associated dog-ears, creases and tears along the edges while the inherent acidity of the iron gall ink had degraded the paper in the inked areas. The cracking of the paper substrate and in some cases complete loss of the paper in inked areas was addressed with support repairs using a translucent Japanese tissue. We discussed with Elizabeth problems and issues to do with the treatment of iron gall inks as well as repair methods and techniques. For repairs to several badly discoloured pages, Michael was able to apply his skills as a conservator of painted icons to toning the repair paper with a perfect colour match. Best studio practice was followed throughout the campaign – such as working on clean surfaces and blotters, using appropriate handling skills and protecting objects which were not actively being worked on with blotting paper. Labels for the covered work were written up – reading 'Object Under Here' to which Father Bejou, the librarian, added the Arabic translation 'Ugad hena shee tahat' – the title of my



Erica Kotze, Deir al-Surian, May 2006

review.

The visit culminated in a visit from the trustees of the Levantine Foundation and other invited guests to the Deir al-Surian library and the conservation studio. The gems of the collection were displayed for the visitors along with examples of ongoing preservation work. Working in Deir al-Surian provided a rare opportunity to gain first-hand experience in preserving historically significant material in situ, while observing and experiencing the thriving Coptic tradition. It has been an amazing experience for which I must say shokran to Elizabeth, Father Bijoul and the trustees of the



Monks and conservators, May 2006 Field Campaign